

HOW KNOWLEDGE WAS EARNED

by Idries Shah

The teaching story, used widely as an educational tool in the East, has only recently come to be widely appreciated in the West. Stories such as these are said to speak to students on deeper than ordinary levels.

Once upon a time there was a man who decided that he needed knowledge. He set off to look for it, bending his steps towards the house of a learned man.

When he got there he said: "Sufi, you are a wise man! Let me have a portion of your knowledge, so that I may grow it and become worthwhile, for I feel that I am nothing."

The Sufi said: "I can give you knowledge in exchange for something which I myself need. Go and bring me a small carpet, for I have to give it to someone who will then be able to further our holy work."

So the man went off, looking for someone who could let him have thread. When he arrived at the hut of a spinner-woman, he said to her: "Spinner-woman, give me thread. I have to have it for the carpet-man, who will give me a carpet which I will give to a Sufi, who will give it to a man who has to do our holy work. In exchange I will get knowledge, which I want."

The woman immediately answered: "You need thread, what about me? Away with this talk about you, and your Sufi and your carpet-man and the man who has to have the carpet. What about me? I need goat-hair to make thread. Get me some and you can have your thread."

So the man went off, until he came to a goat-herd, and he told him his needs. The goat-herd said: "What about me? You need goat-hair to buy knowledge, I need goats to provide the hair. Get me a goat and I shall help you."

So the man went off, looking for someone who sold goats. When he found such a man he told him his difficulties, and the man said: "What do I know about knowledge, or thread or carpets? All I know is that everyone seems to be looking after his own interests. Let us instead talk about my needs, and if you can satisfy them, then we will talk about goats, and you can think about knowledge all you wish."

"What are your needs?" asked the man.

"I need a pen to keep my goats in at night, because they are straying all over the place. Get me one and then talk about your having a goat or two."

So the man went off to look for a pen. His inquiries led him to a carpenter, who said: "Yes, I can make a pen for the man who needs one. As for the rest, you could have spared me the details, for I am just not interested in carpets or knowledge and the like. But I have a desire, and it is in your interests to help me gain it, otherwise I need not help you with your pen."

"And what is that desire?" asked the man.

"I want to get married and nobody will marry me, it seems. See whether you can arrange a wife for me, and then we will talk about your problems."

So the man went off, and after making exhaustive inquiries he found a woman who

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said: "I know a young woman who has no other desire than to marry just such a carpenter as you describe. In fact she has been thinking about him all her life. It must be some sort of miracle that he does exist and that she can hear of him through you and me. But what about me? Everyone wants what he wants, and people seem to need things, or want things, or imagine that they need help, or really want help, but nobody has yet said anything about my needs."

"And what are your needs?" asked the man.

"I want only one thing," said the woman, "and I have wanted it all my life. Help me to get it, and you can have anything I have. The thing that I want, as I have experienced everything else, is -- knowledge."

"But we cannot have knowledge without a carpet," said the man.

"I do not know what knowledge is, but I am sure that it is not a carpet," said the woman.

"No," said the man, seeing that he had to be patient, "but with the girl for the carpenter we can get the pen for the goats. With the pen for the goats we can get the goat-hair for the spinner. With the goat-hair we can get the thread. With the thread we can get the carpet. With the carpet we can get the knowledge."

"It sounds preposterous to me," said the woman, "and I for one am not going to go to those lengths."

In spite of his entreaties, she sent him away.

These difficulties and the confusion which they caused him first made him almost despair of the human race. He wondered whether he could use knowledge when he got it, and he wondered why all those people were only thinking of their own interests. And slowly he began to think only of the carpet.

One day this man was wandering through the streets of a market-town, muttering to himself.

A certain merchant heard him, and drew near to catch his words. The man was saying: "A carpet is needed to give to a man so that he may be able to do this holy work of ours."

The merchant realized that there was something exceptional about the wanderer, and addressed him:

"Wandering dervish, I do not understand your chant, but I have deep respect for one such as you, who has embarked upon the Path of Truth. Please help me, if you will, for I know that the people of the Sufi way have a special function in society."

The wanderer looked up and saw the distress on the merchant's face and said to him: "I am suffering and I have suffered. You are undoubtedly in trouble, but I have nothing. I cannot even get a piece of thread when I want it. But ask me and I will do anything that I can."

"Know, fortunate man!" said the merchant, "that I have an only and beautiful daughter. She is suffering from an illness which has caused her to languish. Come to her and perhaps you will be able to effect a cure."

Such was the man's distress and so high were his hopes that the wanderer followed him to the girl's bedside.

As soon as she saw him, she said: "I do not know who you are, but I feel you may be able to help me. In any case there is nobody else. I am in love with such-and-such a carpenter." And she named the man whom the traveller had asked to make the pen for the goats.

"Your daughter wants to marry a certain respectable carpenter whom I know," he told the merchant. The merchant was overjoyed, for he had thought that the girl's talk about the carpenter had been the

symptom, not the cause, of her disease. He had, in fact, thought her mad.

The traveller went to the carpenter, who built the pen for the goats. The goat-seller presented him with some fine animals; he took them to the goat-herd, who gave him goat-hair, which he took to the spinner, who gave him thread. Then he took the thread to the carpet-seller, who gave him a small carpet.

This carpet he carried back to the Sufi. When he arrived at the house of the wise man, the latter said to him: "Now I can give you knowledge; for you could not have brought this carpet unless you had worked for the carpet, and not for yourself."